

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Appalachia Regional Laboratory Synthesis Report

I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia are the four states served by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL). The Region is rich in history and diverse in population. While predominantly rural, the Region includes substantial metropolitan areas, including Fairfax County, Virginia (which comprises much of suburban Washington, D.C.), Richmond, Norfolk, Memphis, Louisville, and Nashville, along with dozens of large towns. The geography of the Region is varied. The most striking geographic feature is the Appalachian Mountain chain which bisects the Region from northeast to southwest. Since early settlement, this range has been a barrier to travel and, until well into this century, a barrier to communication and commerce. As a barrier to commerce, the mountains have condemned much of the Region to grinding poverty that persists today. The cultural impact of poverty on the educational needs of the Region's children and the attending scarcity of resources to meet those needs dominates the consciousness of the AEL Board and professional staff.

The states within the Region are remarkably interested in and committed to school reform. In the 1980s, Tennessee was in the forefront of the nation's movement toward accountability, especially for teachers. In 1990, Kentucky enacted the nation's most comprehensive school reform legislation, and today, Kentucky's program is still the most far-reaching reform plan of any state in the nation. West Virginia is leading the nation in its tax revision effort in support of public education, despite its poverty levels. Virginia has just published the results of its first administration of a new commonwealth test and plans to persist

with its testing program, even though some of the results are painful for them to consider.

The Phase III Standards, approved in 1998, mandate that the Regional Labs will undergo a peer review process during the third year of the present funding cycle, considered an “interim assessment” and conducted during a recipient’s period of performance, which will focus on formative evaluation. The evaluation visit to the Appalachia Educational Laboratory covering the first three years of the FY 1996-2000 contract took place at the Laboratory headquarters in Charleston, West Virginia, from April 16-20, 1999. The assigned panel consisted of John Brickell (retired Dean of a School of Education), Kerry Davidson (Senior Deputy Commissioner from Louisiana), Nancy Karweit (independent consultant), David Leo-Nyquist (teacher educator and Panel Chair), and Wes Smith (a school superintendent).

The panelists reviewed multiple operational documents (required by the Standards) and a sampling of materials (“advance materials”) selected collaboratively by Decision Information Resources, Inc. and the OERI Program Officer assigned to the Laboratory. In addition, the panelists conducted on-site data collection activities, and took part in all scheduled presentations and briefings detailed in the Site Visit Agenda (attached). Interviews were conducted with project staff, the Executive Director, representatives of the governing Board of Directors, project directors, and project participants from the field, including teachers, administrators, parents, and students, as well as policymakers. In addition, two video teleconferencing and two phone conferencing sessions were held with participants from QUEST schools. Combined with the written documentation provided, the five days of interviews illuminated major initiatives at the Lab. Sufficient documentation and insights were provided to address the key evaluation questions presented by OERI.

Note: The five individual evaluation reports were remarkably similar in terms of their

overall positive assessment of AEL programs and activities over the first three years of this contract period. Thus, this Synthesis Report is more notable for its “common findings” summarized in detail here, than for the “diversity of opinion” expressed in the individual reports. Unless otherwise noted, the findings articulated here represent substantial agreement among the Peer Review panelists.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

Strengths

At this interim reporting point, AEL appears to be performing adequately to above expectations in fulfilling the details of the original proposal and modifications, with the possible exception of the rural specialty (see pages 22-24 below). In addition, the work appears to be completed in a timely fashion, although the original proposal did not provide exact deliverable dates, so this is difficult to assess. When a project is delayed, the reasons for the delay are usually noted in the quarterly project report. For example, the Kentucky Writing Project experienced a minor delay in waiting for the evaluation data from the Kentucky Department of Education, which was noted and explained in the quarterly report.

Through its program activities, AEL is addressing significant issues in educational change and reform throughout the Region, such as studying the effects of mandated school reform in Kentucky, and developing tools and processes for school renewal in QUEST and CSRD.

Several elements of AEL’s organizational structure are critical to making certain that

resources converge in a functional manner. All of AEL's key programs report to a single individual, the Program Leader, which allows coordination across programs to be facilitated on a daily basis. AEL's Program Leader joins with program directors throughout the Lab as a member of the decision-making Corporate Leadership Group (CLG), headed by the Executive Director. In this manner coordination of programs across AEL is facilitated. In addition, a more recent structure places Resident Directors in each of the Region's four states who meet monthly, and the organizational structure also includes a Policy Staff which targets services to key statewide policymakers to assist them in decisionmaking.

The Executive Director has been at AEL for some 25 years, and is stepping down this summer. The organizational structure has been reorganized somewhat to accommodate for this transition period, and a new Director has been named. The details of the transition plan seem to be worked out, although it appears that, as is normal, there is still some change going on in the reorganization plan.

On all advisory and governance committees there appear to be sufficient and balanced representation from all expected constituencies, including teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, the private sector, higher education, and state education departments. The governing board rotates its four meetings each year among the states, allowing for first-hand knowledge of projects in the states and for interaction with project participants. Board members also serve on project advisory committees, and provide oversight on all projects.

Relating sensitively to the needs of the Region is a great strength of AEL. Much of the Review Panel's concern about AEL's limited enthusiasm for seeking to have a national influence and reputation (detailed below) is balanced by, and made up for, by its unswerving determination to serve its Region well. The Executive Director made the Lab's regional priority clear to the

Review Panel when he commented that AEL is “terribly regionally focused.” The networks and partnerships which AEL has established within the Region, both formal and informal, are so ubiquitous that they defy easy description or definition. The Lab views state and regional networking and partnering as the essence of its daily business.

Based on the review of documents provided by AEL, interviews with a wide range of project participants and recipients of project reports (i.e., state policymakers), it is abundantly clear that AEL is doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years. Further, we conclude that AEL has exceeded the expectations of Implementation and Management of the projects and tasks as outlined in the technical proposal and subsequent revised documents. There appear to be sufficient resources to carry out the various functions and programs proposed by the Lab, although AEL, like any externally funded organization, must make decisions about how best to allocate a finite set of resources to support a limited number of projects. Such decisions appear to be made with the input of appropriate persons, including clients, decision makers, and project staff.

AEL is also becoming more attuned to working within the context of the standards-based and “systemic” reform initiatives that are driving school improvement efforts throughout the Region—and the nation. The Signature Works examined in greatest detail by the Review Panel (QUEST and the KERA studies) are reflective of AEL’s commitment to support standards-based reform in its Region, and of AEL’s capacity for carrying out the plans outlined in their proposal to OERI.

Areas of needed improvement

There are some emphases of OERI which do not appear as high priorities within AEL. Intense regional dedication is simultaneously a strength and a concern. AEL resources are

primarily focused on meeting immediate regional needs, not on data collection, research efforts, and national-level publication and dissemination. Regarding the rural specialty, a strong regional focus limits an understanding of rural educational needs in other regions.

Rural education dominates the Region and AEL's attention, so much so that AEL has not well-defined rural education or clarified its programmatic and research strategies in rural-specific ways. AEL's difficulty in clarifying its rural work was described by one panel member as "like asking a fish to define water." This lack of clarity can present difficulties for those in rural areas in other parts of the country that do not share the same attributes as Appalachian rural areas. For example, for much of the country, it is distance and sparse population that create the greatest challenges, not exceptional poverty. This would cause little concern were it not for AEL's designation as the rural specialist among the Regional Laboratories. (See question #8 below)

Years of responding to RFPs have led to organizing AEL (and other Regional Labs) according to projects. This programmatic compartmentalization has resulted in making communications across programs difficult. The Review Panel found evidence that considerable AEL accumulated experience and expertise does not flow readily from one AEL program to another. Although some important steps are beginning to be taken to address this concern, the interactions among programs that do occur appear to be more serendipitous than to happen by design. More attention and effort needs to be put into a more formalized intra-Lab network of interactions among various project staffs.

At AEL there are few incentives from the central administration and some possible disincentives to publish in refereed journals and present regularly at diverse national conferences. Nothing should compromise AEL's invaluable commitment to serving its Region

well, but there are obviously exemplary models and practices being developed within the Lab which should be shared more broadly.

Recommendations for improvement

While maintaining its commendable regional focus, AEL should maintain a more balanced portfolio by providing special incentives for a larger number of staff members to achieve greater recognition for major AEL programs by making national presentations and publishing in refereed journals. This may call for hiring an additional writer to help specifically with this publication stage of AEL initiatives. AEL needs to emphasize an increased national awareness and perspective in all projects, from proposal to the completion stage.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

Strengths

AEL's formal organization for monitoring its activities is reasonable and effective. Self-monitoring and feedback is a common theme throughout AEL's evaluations, studies, and reports, conducted both internally and externally. Considerable attention is given to developing programs on an interactive needs assessment basis. Interviews with project staff and clients revealed that single-event (i.e., workshops, symposia, etc.) monitoring routinely takes place as a source of immediate feedback to on-site project staff. A review of project proposals and revised project documents revealed that such evaluation and monitoring activities have been used appropriately to revise and improve project activities. This was particularly true for the signature projects of QUEST and KERA that received in-depth review.

AEL employs an internal and—though not required by OERI to do so—an external evaluator, who report regularly to Lab leadership and professional staff. These reports are used

to promote self-reflection within AEL, and are sent to OERI. Regular meetings of the Corporate Leadership Group also contribute to the self-monitoring process. The Lab has also begun to use a portfolio review process—essentially an organizational self-study—as part of their ongoing internal evaluation process. This portfolio process has been in use for a decade at Far West Laboratory and for five years at North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Within the KERA project, since the beginning AEL has convened a highly qualified Peer Review Panel once a year to provide expert advice and feedback to project staff.

The governing Board also appears to play a significant role in the overall self-monitoring process. AEL involves a diverse group of individuals on its Board, which includes teachers, school administrators, local school board members, representatives from higher education, Chief State School Officers, state legislators, state department of education personnel, and representatives from business/industry, PTAs, the media, and other groups. AEL states that “the Board is deeply involved in the Lab’s ongoing work. It serves to keep the focus of the Lab on the most pertinent state and local needs and to ensure that projects deliver the greatest possible impact for the effort invested.” The interview conducted with six Board members during the Site Visit confirmed this claim. Regular meetings of the Board, which is actively involved in and quite knowledgeable about the full range of AEL activities in the Region, provide a valuable and continuous form of feedback to AEL leadership and professional staff.

The external evaluations that have been regularly conducted by the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University (WMU) have two major components: an annual client survey, and a meta-analysis of AEL’s internal evaluation reports, both conducted by the same WMU evaluator for the past 8-9 years. According to the Senior Research and Evaluation Specialist of AEL’s Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) unit, these external evaluations have been used

by AEL staff to revise and improve projects, project reports, and PRE's evaluation reports. It was abundantly clear to the Review Panel that AEL is committed to high levels of monitoring and evaluation of its projects and seeks a variety of input from internal evaluation staff, clients, and external evaluators for the improvement of Lab effectiveness and activities. In summary, AEL exceeds reasonable expectations in tailoring its programs to meet customer needs.

Areas of needed improvement

Communication across programs is much less consistent than communication within project teams. Although there are obvious recent efforts being made to address this issue (for example, the recent staff retreat and the Learning Lab strategy), more attention needs to be given to keeping all staff "on the same page" in terms of lessons learned and strategies applied.

AEL also needs to adopt a broader definition of "customer," to include, especially in key areas, a national as well as a regional audience.

Recommendations for improvement

AEL needs to be more sensitive to its responsibilities to national customers. In addition, existing intra-lab communication procedures should be more oriented towards ensuring meaningful communication of ideas and successful models across projects.

Internal evaluation is currently conducted by staff from AEL's Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) unit on an assigned/buy-out basis. One panelist suggested that it may be appropriate for AEL to consider including a full-time researcher/evaluator as part of the project staff within the signature and specialty area projects (i.e., KERA, QUEST, and the rural specialty).

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

Strengths

Within the Region, AEL is developing products and services of unusually high quality. The products and services emanating from AEL's operations appear to be enhanced by the knowledge of the applied areas by project staff, knowledge and reviews of the relevant research literature, and input and reviews by appropriate clients and other target audiences. QUEST, a "work in progress," is a prime example. The project grew out of a previous project known as QUILT, an instructional improvement program that develops teachers' questioning strategies. The true character of the QUEST program is not found in the documentation about it or in hearing about the program from project staff. Its true character is revealed in the voices of the participants--the teachers, administrators, parents, and students--who directly benefit from the program. Discussions with these participants revealed the program's great strengths.

These discussions revealed that QUEST is helping participating schools by enlarging their understanding of student learning beyond traditional testing measures, and by assisting schools in building learning communities around specific goals and objectives. Each QUEST school, in every state, is clearly being held accountable for making improvements in traditional measures of academic achievement. The strong program belief that students should be meaningfully involved in educational decisionmaking has encouraged a number of schools to organize parent-teacher conferences led by students, and all school stakeholders interviewed reported a much greater interest and involvement among parents in school affairs. At one high school the empowering of students has led to the creation of a new student newspaper to which parents, teachers, and students contribute, and there appears to be a significant focus on parent

and student participation throughout the QUEST network.

In many instances QUEST serves as a conduit of good ideas which have origins in other reform efforts. The “Data-in-a-Day” initiative, which engages school teams in assessing schoolwide goals, was adapted from the Northwest Lab’s School Change Collaborative program. In another school, a focus on student writing portfolios through the protocol process was influenced by AEL’s work with the School Change Collaborative, and several network schools are involved in creating “micro-societies,” which has been used around the country for more than 20 years.

AEL’s KERA studies are another prime example of the Lab’s ongoing involvement in a high-quality project of national significance. In 1990 the Commonwealth of Kentucky enacted the most comprehensive school reform program in the country, and the Legislature has stayed the course for nine years. KERA (the Kentucky Educational Reform Act) has commanded national attention as a model for other state reform programs since its inception. Soon after the KERA legislation was enacted, AEL approached Kentucky policymakers to suggest that AEL undertake a study of the reform’s implementation in local school districts as a way to provide feedback to the decisionmakers. The idea was well-received by both Kentucky policymakers and federal officials, and four rural school districts were selected as cases to study. Five years later the study was extended for an additional five-year period, and the same four districts continue as the subjects of the study. In a phone conference conducted during the Site Visit, the Chair of the Kentucky State Board of Education noted that as the state Board has become more data-driven in its decisionmaking, AEL has consistently provided relevant quantitative and qualitative data which has enhanced the Board’s consideration and resolution of issues.

Conversations with various state stakeholders revealed a common thread of trust in the

research of AEL and the belief that they are unbiased in their approach and fair in their conclusions.

AEL is understandably proud of the reputation of its products. In specific reference to Lab publications, AEL asserts that “the care taken in the preparation of AEL products pays off in terms of client acceptance and use.” “Notes from the Field,” AEL’s periodic newsletter to report the KERA study’s findings, is valued by Kentucky policymakers as well as by others across the nation who want to know more about Kentucky’s historical legislation, and it is widely disseminated. The publication is automatically sent to a mailing list of 3,441, which includes all superintendents and principals in Kentucky’s schools. AEL’s quarterly newsletter, The Link, is mailed free of charge to more than 6,500 educators and education stakeholders across the Region. The staff will also continue to produce two issues of Policy Briefs each year. A close examination of all these publications reveals outstanding examples of successful efforts to communicate Lab findings broadly within the Region and to provide timely information in a clear and easily understood manner.

Areas of needed improvement

Although it was clear to the Review Panel that, on the whole, AEL is producing high-quality products and services, there was general agreement that more attention could be given to publication in refereed journals and to gaining more national recognition for their work. Several panelists also recommended the need to minimize potential areas of duplication in the improvement of products and services by a more formalized process of intra-Lab interactions.

Recommendations for improvement

In specific reference to the QUEST program, one reviewer asserted that the program does not directly address instructional needs, and that it is possible for a school to become involved in

the QUEST process and never directly address instruction, achievement, or student learning. The reviewer's recommendation is that a direct connection to instruction should be a required aspect of the program, and that baseline data on instructional and school climate issues should be required of schools upon application to the program and before any AEL intervention takes place. Another concern of this reviewer was that no middle schools currently participate in the QUEST network, except as they may be inadvertently thrown in because they are part of a K-8 configuration. The reviewer's recommendation is for QUEST to "scale up" to a district-wide application of the project, that includes all the "pieces": elementary, middle school, and high school.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

Strengths

AEL appears to provide very useful products for its clients. From the on-site and teleconference interviews with project clients/customers, it was quite apparent to the Review Panel that the area of "utility" represents an area of major strength for AEL in terms of the products and services they provide to the educational community and policymakers of the four-state Region. As one principal from a QUEST project schools put it, "I can always rely on the AEL network to provide a continually high level of professionalism, and they have been continually helpful in finding resources when needed." AEL honors what it refers to as the "wisdom of practice" as it captures the experience of its clients in its product development. Specific commendations for AEL in terms of the usefulness of the support provided

through the QUEST network include a focus on improved school climate as indicated by teacher interactions, student behavior, and parent involvement in parent conferences; and appreciation for the increased capacity—through AEL support—of the total school community to look critically at its strengths and weaknesses.

Areas of needed improvement

As AEL projects move into the “scaling up” stage, more attention will need to be given to communicate with a national, not just a regional, audience. OERI and other national audiences should be given greater consideration so that the successes and learnings from AEL programs can be widely shared.

Recommendations for improvement

Two reviewers noted that a more consistent collection of baseline data about their customers (schools and students) would not only improve the research value of AEL interventions, but would also result in AEL’s deeper knowledge of its customer base, which could assist them in further refining their product design process.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

Strengths

From the composition of the governing Board, to the membership of program and Lab advisory committees, to the development and revision of individual projects, products, and services, there is a consistent attention within AEL to focusing on customer needs within the Region. The Lab appears to operate in a genuinely collaborative, interactive, and supportive way with its various client groups. This focus on customer needs was evident in virtually all the documents reviewed and in interviews with a wide selection of project participants interviewed during the visit. A high degree of customer satisfaction with AEL products and services is

consistently noted in evaluations and surveys pertaining to particular programs, and in the overall evaluations conducted regularly by the external evaluator from Western Michigan University. There were no responses received by the Review Panel during the site visit which contradicted this basic position.

AEL is clearly focused in its work on students and their teachers, and service to the field enjoys great emphasis across projects. Products and services emerge from the experience and articulated needs of regional customers. QUEST, the Kentucky Writing Project, and many other AEL products and services were designed in the field and tailored to meet the specific needs of customers. In addition, customers have participated in designing many of the products they use. AEL employs a very interactive design and modification approach.

Areas of needed improvement

As AEL moves to expand its overall perspective from a regional to a national focus, it should also expand its understanding of "customer" to be more nationally inclusive.

Recommendations for improvement

Clearly identifying—and expanding—the understanding of “customers” of the Laboratory in general and of individual projects specifically would sharpen the focus of product development and implementation.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

Strengths

Virtually all of AEL’s major initiatives can be viewed as contributing in some way to

improved student academic success. None of them, however, can directly document a cause-and-effect relationship. The reasons vary. Since all of AEL's major initiatives are collaborative efforts with states, districts, schools, and communities, even where increased student success may result, the issue of "attribution" is unclear. In the case of the KERA studies, additional attention to student achievement is planned in forthcoming impact studies, and some AEL initiatives are simply too young to have significantly impacted student achievement.

It was clear to the Review Panel, however, that the consistent and ongoing collection of student achievement data in the schools it works with has not been a Lab priority to this point. Based upon discussions with project staffs and project participant interviews, it was also clear that there is an increasing awareness within AEL of the importance of looking at improvements in student academic success as a key indicator of project success, although this awareness does not yet translate into a Labwide focus on student outcomes.. It was also clear to the Review Panel that AEL is well-positioned in several of its major initiatives (for example, within the KERA studies, QUEST, and the Hancock County project) to explore a variety of important connections between significant systemic reform efforts and improvements in student achievement and performance that would be of interest to a national audience.

Areas of needed improvement

A more consistent focus on the measurement of student outcomes—broadly conceived—is needed. Because of the Lab's commitment to helping schools find their own solutions, the kinds of student outcomes focused upon may vary from project to project. Thus, involvement with AEL programs may not, for example, always result in immediate and direct improvement in student test scores, but may still produce observable and even measurable changes in student performance in other areas.

To illustrate this point: At this relatively early stage of its development, QUEST is not directly focused within its project schools on student achievement. Rather, it emphasizes strengthening the schoolwide infrastructure and collaborative environment that can make significant gains in student achievement possible over time. The great strengths of the project are its focus on involving all stakeholders in schoolwide improvement efforts (including the strong commitment to involving students and parents mentioned above), and its success in creating a regional network of QUEST schools that support each other in their collective efforts.

In addressing this issue of student outcomes, two Review Panelists speak directly to AEL's strong "process orientation" to their work. The AEL way is highly collaborative, not a top-down or one-size-fits-all approach. AEL program staff typically work with their school clients to build local capacity to "continuously improve," and they describe that process as dynamic and organic. A strong focus on student outcomes may be perceived, from this perspective, as incompatible with this kind of process approach. Both reviewers urge AEL leadership and staff to work towards a better balance between a focus on "process" and a focus on "results" (i.e., on student outcomes) in their program planning and program activities. They suggest that the two approaches can be complementary, instead of mutually exclusive.

Recommendations for improvement

Student outcomes can be broadly defined and need not be confined to results generated by traditional assessment measures. For example, the QUEST project staff could develop student performance indicators that show how the specific tools the staff has developed or adapted for use in project schools affect a range of student outcomes. Greater emphasis within QUEST schools and within the QUEST network on exploring changes in student performance levels as a result of involvement in AEL activities like Data In A Day, the use of the protocol

process, and student networking activities at periodic Rallies may yield insights about how to measure (or more clearly “bring into view”) a wide range of student outcomes that can be applied to other projects and support similar approaches at other Regional Labs.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

Strengths

AEL’s performance in this area is among its greatest strengths. AEL excels at working with schools and localities to implement comprehensive school reform. When states have asked AEL for help, they have received it. This finding was amply supported by all individuals interviewed, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, state department representatives, and other state-level policymakers.

AEL sees it as “imperative that a Regional Lab champion and present impartial scientific evidence to inform decisionmaking at all levels of education.” This reputation of being a neutral source of information has built confidence in AEL’s work among divergent groups, even in the midst of conflict over issues related to educational policy. This claim was confirmed by our interviews with various representatives connected with the Kentucky State Legislature, the State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Center for Strategic Policy Studies. Through the KERA studies, AEL has provided useful insights on the implementation progress of the first significant state-mandated school reform initiative in the nation. This information has been extremely useful to state policymakers in gauging how well the reform is “taking” in Kentucky schools. A quotation from our interviews with Kentucky state officials confirmed the important role that AEL has played in their efforts at systemic reform:

“AEL has been a consistent voice in looking at Kentucky. There has been a lot of other research that has been done in a concentrated period of time, and then the

researcher goes away never to be seen again. AEL has provided a more comprehensive, longitudinal look at the underlying reasons for the patterns in the data. We trust this data. Their contribution has been enormous.”

AEL’s technical assistance to the state of Virginia to serve underachieving schools is another example of its ongoing assistance to states and localities in support of large-scale reform initiatives, as are AEL’s collaborative activities under the CSRD initiatives. Another AEL strength in this area is its ability to help states, districts, and schools leverage scarce resources. AEL effectively collaborates with various stakeholders—including other Labs such as SEDL and NWREL, as well as state Departments of Education, most intensively in Kentucky—to form strategic alliances to effect change.

A great strength—and ongoing tension—within AEL is their attempt to support local schools, especially rural schools in each of the Region’s four states, as they “undertake contextually appropriate means to meet the state-mandated standards.” Each of the states appears sincere in its encouragement of local (rural) schools to respond to the state-mandated system of standards and assessments with their own bottom-up approach to implementation. AEL is deeply involved in this process of supporting local schools as they struggle to discover “locally appropriate” solutions to systemic reform initiatives. This exploration of creative local adaptations of statewide reform initiatives can also help AEL strengthen its national role in its specialty area of rural education.

Areas of needed improvement

One reviewer notes that there should be more attention given to the purposive selection of participating school sites to insure variation in important demographic and contextual factors within AEL research studies. It appeared to this reviewer that often schools seemed to be part of an AEL study or project only because they were nominated by someone within AEL or by one

of the Board of Directors. One advantage of a more purposive selection and active recruitment of schools within certain demographic categories is that this could inform our growing understanding of what kinds of interventions seem to work best in which kinds of schools. More attention here could also provide valuable insight into AEL work with CSRD initiatives.

Another reviewer notes that the concept of “scaling up” is primarily understood within AEL as a marketing concept, rather than as the engineering concept that it is. Scaling up means taking a prototype to production, which requires taking a working model and engineering it so it can be produced in greater numbers, with each unit then performing a particular function in the same way. Adopting an engineering view of “scaling up” would better serve the Region, according to this reviewer, by “causing AEL to engineer their school reform products to be more portable.”

Recommendations for improvement

AEL should continue to assist states and localities, but begin to select partners in such a way that will magnify its chances of understanding when, where, and how comprehensive school reform actually works.

AEL should continue to develop better communications vehicles within the Lab and throughout the Region to facilitate ongoing dialogue about comprehensive school improvement strategies. In addition, there needs to be an increased emphasis on promoting nationally what AEL has learned from its Region in this category.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

Strengths

There appears to be sufficient evidence from all sources that AEL has indeed established

an excellent reputation in its specialty area of rural education, particularly in the four-state Region it serves, and that it continues to build on this reputation. Nothing was encountered in the Site Visit that would suggest that AEL will not continue to enjoy its well-earned reputation. The Lab is to be commended on its continuing efforts to increase its visibility nationally by its participation in such organizations as the National Rural Education Association (NREA), the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Rural Special Interest Group, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools , and Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE).

The AEL staff has many years of experience in its specialty area of rural education dating back to the 1960s, and many staff members attended rural schools as children. The Region is predominantly rural, and suffers economically from its isolation. Dealing with small and isolated schools comes naturally to AEL, and its rural focus in the past has been distinctly regional in scope. The work with Hancock County in Tennessee and with the four KERA case study schools in Kentucky is all rural, and many of the challenges these schools face—as well as their assets—are related to their rural settings. Yet AEL's presence in these sites has little to do with its rural specialty; AEL is present because it serving its rural Region. Although rural schools are the clients for many AEL programs and products, most of these were not specifically designed with rural schools and rural contexts in mind.

OERI's RFP calls for the creation of programs and activities—particularly in the specialty area--that reach a national audience and that are broader in scope than a regional focus. The strategy put into place at AEL is to develop a national audience and scope by building upon their regional expertise and work. For example, they see the KERA studies as “lighthouse work for rural education.”

Areas of needed improvement

There was consensus among panelists that AEL needs to take a more proactive role in establishing itself as a national leader in the specialty area of rural education. One panelist referred to AEL's "absence of vision" in the specialty area. This suggests that the Lab consider moving well beyond the role-linking, collaborating, facilitating, and participating with other rural-related individuals and organizations that it already does quite well. While AEL can clearly satisfy a minimalist interpretation of "establishing a regional and national reputation" by continuing to carry out its Rural Specialty work in predictable ways, the Review Panel agrees that a more aggressive and focused interpretation of "national leadership"—within the understandable constraints imposed by limited resources—is both possible and necessary.

Recommendations for improvement

AEL's regional focus appears to limit its awareness of some important current developments in rural communities nationwide. One example of this is AEL's minimal involvement in the Annenberg Rural Challenge network (apart from some participation in Policy and Transportation issues), and in other significant networks of rural practitioners such as the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network and Foxfire. The Annenberg Rural Challenge, in particular, is an enormously ambitious hundred-million-dollar initiative that has created a national network of revitalized rural communities and rural schools that could greatly benefit from AEL's expertise and resources in the area of rural education. AEL's Rural Specialty responsibilities demand that AEL staff take a closer look at how they can more effectively connect and leverage their resources and expertise to provide support for an even broader range of existing rural networks.

The KERA study described above offers as example of how this clarified focus and

expanded understanding of the national implications of its work might express itself within AEL's Rural Specialty Area. Although the KERA researchers' original intent was to use a "general ethnographic approach" to study the four schools within their rural settings, their focus quickly narrowed to examining the intra-school issues associated with classroom implementation of KERA reforms. This narrowed focus has served the practical needs of Kentucky policymakers particularly well. Indeed, in interviews conducted during the Site Visit, these policymakers praised the more 'generic' usefulness of the research as a long-term study of statewide school reform in general, and said that they didn't see it as a "rural study." At least in part in response to their focus on policymakers as their primary client for their research, KERA researchers have largely filtered out the context-specific data related to school size and to the unique rural settings of the participating schools and communities in their published reports.

In addressing this issue, one member of the highly-qualified and responsive KERA Peer Review Panel has urged that the study "incorporate rural issues more than superficially" instead of being framed largely "as a study of KERA implementation, simply set in rural districts." Still another Peer Reviewer has suggested that one of the researchers' future strategies might be to ask: "How could KERA be redesigned to be more effective in rural communities?" And further, "What different kinds of 'rural' are we seeing in the four districts?" Following up on these suggestions from their Peer Review Panel and exploring the implications of these questions can provide the opportunity for the KERA researchers, with the support of the Rural Specialty staff, to deepen their inquiry by fleshing out the rural contexts of the participating schools. This approach can also broaden the scope of the KERA research to include a specifically rural audience, both within the Region and nationwide.

This example is illustrative of a larger effort that needs to take place within AEL to

clarify and sharpen its rural focus across all programs and activities. KERA staff should not remain isolated in their effort to add a specifically “rural dimension” to their work, but should be part of a much larger, Labwide effort coordinated by the Rural Specialty staff. More clarity and focus in the Rural Specialty Area could assist the KERA researchers in “ruralizing” the data they’ve been collecting for ten years, help AEL staff working with other rural schools to apply those insights to their own settings, and help the AEL Rural Specialty staff make an even greater impact nationwide.

VI. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

Strengths

There is great integrity within AEL, and this integrity pervades the Laboratory, its activities, and its products. The outstanding strengths of AEL are its clear vision, focus, and unwavering attention to its mission of serving the Appalachian Region over the past 33 years, and its leadership team headed by the Executive Director, whose tenure spans much of the Lab’s lifetime. He and his staff have unqualified support from a very committed and involved Board of Directors.. AEL has attained an enviable reputation and a position of respect and trust among its constituents in the Region and nationally. The staff and leadership at AEL are clearly committed to the goal of bettering the life chances of the children in the areas they serve. This strong leadership and shared common vision, and the significant efforts being made to move toward that vision, help create another great strength of the Lab, its positive organizational culture.

Overall, the consensus of the Review Panel is that AEL is an outstanding organization

that values people and produces high-quality and useful products and services. It serves the students and people of Appalachia well.

Areas of needed improvement

Adding a national perspective In pursuit of its exemplary service to the Region, AEL has put little emphasis on cultivating its national profile. Again and again, staff members mentioned their reluctance to promote their products and their reputations. Publishing and marketing are considered secondary activities. AEL should recognize that no dichotomy has to exist between effectively serving the Region while achieving a higher degree of national recognition. The reluctance of the Lab to engage, systematically, in “marketing” or to pursue national recognition is regrettable because the nation is denied much of what it could learn from AEL, and because AEL does not receive the recognition and resulting resources that would accrue from that recognition. AEL’s view of national dissemination needs to be reconsidered. Recognition is not the sole purpose of publishing for a national audience; it can also inform deliberations. A stronger emphasis on publishing does not have to result in a slavish publish-or-perish environment, especially if a strong writer is added to the staff to assist in the publication process.

Leadership transition Three panelists mentioned the impending transition of laboratory leadership as both a great concern and a great opportunity. The departure of a strong leader (the Executive Director) who has served a long tenure signals great adjustments. It will be a valuable time to revisit existing assumptions, which may result in modifying or reconfirming the values, culture, and practices of the organization. Going through this process is “a healthy exercise,” as one panelist puts it.

Internal communications There is agreement among panelists that communications

within the organization appear to be somewhat fragmented, though not unusually so. The staff attributes many of the communication obstacles to years of responding to calls for proposals that have created programmatic compartmentalization. The panelists were made aware of a variety of formal in-house communication structures, including retreats, seminars sponsored by the Rural Center, an organization of program officers, and the recently established “Learning Lab,” which, when combined with informal communications and a strong Labwide collaborative spirit, encourage communication across programs. Nevertheless, project leaders and project staff in their presentations rarely attributed ideas and strategies employed within their activities to other AEL programs. We commend the Lab on steps already taken to address the issue of intra-Lab communication, and recommend that these structures be used more consistently and systematically throughout AEL. As one reviewer put it, “There is a need for you to become clients for each others’ work.”

Cross-project sharing Closely related to the issue of intra-Lab communication is the thoughtful application of “lessons learned” in one project to other areas of Lab activities. One example that comes to mind is AEL staff expertise in networking noted by several Review Panelists. Specific AEL projects (QUEST, for example) have clearly demonstrated the staff’s existing capacity for creating and sustaining active networks of practitioners. The QUEST project uses this strategic networking ability to successfully join together schools, teachers, students, and parents in an innovative school change process. This same networking expertise could be more effectively employed in other AEL programs—for example, within the Rural Specialty Area to connect AEL resources with existing rural networks of teachers and schools.

Data collection and student outcomes focus Documentation of reform is of great future value, even if that value is not immediately apparent. The data collected today may be

vital to some future project at AEL or elsewhere. Schools and practitioners may be forgiven for being too engrossed in instruction to document improvement efforts, but not research and development organizations like the Regional Labs. Both current and future AEL programs and studies need to consider student achievement outcomes more directly, and such a focus needs to be present in the earliest stages of project planning. The long-term usefulness of AEL's work is reduced because the direct impacts of their activities are not sufficiently documented or focused upon student outcomes. (See pages 16-17 above)

Stronger leadership in the rural specialty area See pages 22-24 above

Recommendations for Improvement

1. AEL should provide for more formalized and consistent opportunities for intra-lab collaboration and communication, building upon important steps in this direction already taken. The issue of project isolation should be addressed directly by looking for potential areas of cross-project collaboration, and designing a specific process with measurable goals to accomplish this. In order to encourage the dissemination of useful insights and best practices, teams working on particular projects should periodically report to the staff at large in a manner that encourages interactive discussion and follow-up.
2. AEL should give greater consideration to collecting baseline student performance data and to measuring the impact of its activities on student outcomes across all projects and tasks. There are certainly complexities involved in studying and interpreting "effects," but it is still important to do so. These effects do not have to be considered only in terms of traditional measures of student achievement test performance, but those traditional measures should certainly be an important part of the data collected.
3. AEL should take steps to increase (1) its national visibility in general, and, more specifically, (2) its national leadership role in its Specialty Area of rural education.